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The Poet and Modern Life

THE POET AND MODERN LIFE

The problems confronting the modern poet are exceedingly complex. How can poetry, which is essentially order, affirmation, achievement, be created in an age, a *milieu*, of profound doubt and discouragement? How is it possible to build up a "spiritual monument" when the most necessary elements are lacking—in a period of social disorder, mental anarchy, when so very few are at all concerned with intellectual progress and so many are utterly bounded by material progress? How, again, is the poet to obtain the ideas and knowledge which are the matter he works with, when he is simply confused by an immeasurable discord, a vast unsynthesized knowledge? And does not this situation, undeniable, I think, and so much more acute than it was fifty years ago, lend strength to Matthew Arnold's pessimism, and force us to conclude that now, if ever, must be an age of criticism, an age of pure conservation, if any intellectual life is to survive the dying of the Renaissance? The narrow ideas of comfort and utilitarianism, which are the motive force of the contemporary revolution, must of necessity be unfruitful in the larger sphere of the mind. In our progress we have become curiously abased; from the Hellenic dream of god-like man in harmony with nature, from the mediaeval dream of man transcending nature through religion, from the Renaissance dream which infused a new life into Hellenism, from those centuries when the life of the senses and the intelligence struggled with the life of the spirit and sentiment, we have fallen into an apathy of discouragement

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

where we hope for no more than that each individual should conform to "modern standards of living." Man exists spiritually as he conceives of himself; and the modern world conceives of man, through a vague deceptive mist of "social reform," as an animal which eats, drinks, is clothed, travels and needs to be amused; add to this a little confused "education," a little tepid "religion," and a fair amount of ancient superstition revived as "new thought," and you get a not too incorrect picture of the modern world and its motives. Deep spiritual enthusiasm and energy, disinterested thought, unfettered intelligence, profound culture, where will you find a combination of these essentials of poetry?

Meanwhile we go on writing, many just echoing the words of their predecessors, some trying to strike out rough new images of vitality, a few trying to add to mere vitality the mellowness of culture, the permanence of intelligence. Certain writers, impatient with that mere aping of a vanished order which is unhappily the mark of modern poetry in England, have thrown violently aside the reflective, the intellectual aspects of their art to create something which is essentially only vital. This is preferable to stagnation, but it is not nearly enough. I should like to see that vitality more mellow, saturated with fertile ideas, enlightened; for so far it has done little but interpret a violent material activity. How indeed could it do more? The essential elements are lacking, for without an intelligent, enlightened, cultivated *milieu* each poet speaks into pandemonium, loses himself in confusion or in egotism, in provincialism. R. A.